

## **Lt. Thomas James Eugene Crotty: Mine Specialist, Demolitions Expert, Naval Officer, Artilleryman, Marine and Coast Guardsman in the Battle for Corregidor**

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One may become a leader in a variety of ways. Some learn the skills over the course of a lifetime, while a rare few are born with the talent to lead others. This is the story of Thomas James Eugene Crotty, an extraordinary leader, who became an outstanding Coast Guard officer. As a Coast Guard lieutenant, Crotty participated in Philippine combat operations in 1941 and 1942 as a member of U.S. Navy, Marine and Army units and distinguished himself in a variety of missions against an overwhelming enemy force. During the Japanese invasion of the Philippines, Crotty relied on his innate leadership skills time and again in the defense of Bataan and Corregidor.

Born in 1912, Thomas James Eugene “Jimmy” Crotty was the youngest in a family of five boys and a girl. He grew up in the old Fifth Ward of Buffalo, New York, and devoted his childhood to playing as well as managing and coaching team sports in South Buffalo. William Joyce, one of Crotty’s childhood friends, later wrote Jimmy’s mother, Helen Crotty, and reminisced about “those wonderful days when we were boys, athletes, and friends together.” Crotty competed for three years on the American Legion junior baseball team and, in 1929, his senior year in high school, he managed and coached the team to win the Legion’s junior national championship. Many of the trophies and photographs from Crotty’s winning teams remain on display in an American Legion post on the south side of Buffalo.



*“Jimmy” Crotty as a young man. (USCG Photo)*

By 1929, Crotty’s senior year at Buffalo’s South Park High School, he applied for entrance to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. In the essay examination for the Academy, Crotty put down in words his opinion regarding the nearly ratified London Naval Treaty of 1930. He prophetically noted that the United States “accepted a compromise with England and Japan which gave to these two countries exactly what they wanted . . . while [the] United States gained nothing which was necessary for her to regain her power in the sea.” Later in the essay, he wrote, “War, that deadly horror which spreads destruction and ruin to many innocent and harmless countries, must be abolished.”

As an Academy cadet, Crotty excelled in athletics once again, participating in basketball for three years. He competed in football all four years, serving as the team captain his senior year. During his time at the Academy, Crotty also served as class vice president and, during his senior year, as class president and company commander. In the 1934 Academy yearbook, Tide Rips, the editorial staff wrote: “He will be missed by all of us when we come to the temporary parting of ways, but the future will be enlightened with thoughts that we will serve with him

again. Bon Voyage and Good Luck.” For most of Crotty’s friends, graduation would be the last time they would see their classmate and friend.



*Cadet Crotty hitting the books at the Academy. (USCG)*

After graduation, Crotty had a brief but promising Coast Guard career, which hardened him into a mature leader. For six years, he served on board cutters based out of New York, Seattle, Sault Ste. Marie and San Diego. His career included duty on the cutter Tampa, during its famous rescue of passengers from the burning liner Morro Castle, and a Justice Department appointment as special deputy on the Bering Sea Patrol. Throughout these years, Crotty continued to play on and coach Coast Guard sports teams.

In the late 1930s, diplomatic tensions increased in the Pacific between the U.S. and Imperial Japan and the American military began sending additional personnel and units to overseas outposts. These tensions and military moves set Crotty on a collision course with tragic events unfolding halfway around the world in the Pacific.

In 1941, Lt. Crotty’s career took a unique turn as he began training with the U.S. Navy for specialized service in mine warfare. Jimmy Crotty probably embraced the opportunity to cross-train with the U.S. Navy. As one of Crotty’s commanding officers indicated, Jimmy was “forceful and always enthusiastic about engaging in new problems; sometimes ‘too’ willing to attempt things when perhaps, maturer judgment would suggest further consideration.” In April 1941, Crotty received orders to undertake studies in mine warfare at the Navy’s Mine Warfare School in Yorktown, Virginia. With additional training at the Navy’s Mine Recovery Unit at the Washington (D.C.) Navy Yard, Crotty became the Coast Guard’s leading expert in mine warfare, demolition and the use of explosives.



*Crotty as a young Coast Guard officer. (USCG)*

In early October, Crotty received orders from the commander of the Navy’s Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Thomas C. Hart, to sail for the Philippines and join a navy mine recovery unit at the fleet’s homeport in Manila. On September 2, Crotty saw his family for the last time after a visit to Buffalo. By September 5, he departed San Francisco on board the passenger liner S.S. President Taylor on a one-way trip to the South Pacific. The thirty-year-old officer thought his deployment would last six months, but he would never return from the Philippines.

On October 28, Crotty arrived in Manila and the Navy attached him to In-Shore Patrol Headquarters at its Cavite Navy Yard. By that time, overall theatre commander General Douglas Macarthur expected an attack by the Japanese military during in the first half of 1942. However, on December 7, 1941, without warning or provocation, the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack on military installations at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.



*Cavite Navy Yard in flames after the surprise attack by Japanese bombers. (US Army Photo)*

The next several months tested Crotty's mental and physical limits. On December 10, Japanese aircraft bombed and destroyed most of the facilities at Cavite and advancing enemy ground forces necessitated the movement of American personnel behind fortified lines on the Bataan Peninsula and on the island fortress of Corregidor in Manila Bay. By December 26, the navy had transferred the Sixteenth

Naval District Headquarters from Cavite to Fort Mills, located inside of Corregidor Island.

After the destruction of Cavite, Crotty served a variety of roles with several units. In mid-December, he moved on board the minesweeper USS Quail (AM-15) as second in command and came to be known as "T.J.E." by his shipmates. Meanwhile, he supervised the demolition of strategic civilian and military facilities to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. These assets included the fleet submarine USS Sea Lion (SS-195), which the enemy had damaged during the December 10 air attack. Crotty had the sub stripped of useful parts, filled it with depth charges and blew it up sometime around Christmas Day. Sources indicate that Crotty participated in further demolition work at Cavite and neighboring Sangley Point Naval Station throughout December, before the enemy closed in on the bases.

While serving as second in command of Quail, Crotty would disappear for days at a time, not only for demolition missions, but wherever his services were needed most. By January, the Japanese ruled the skies over the Philippines, so naval aviator Commander Francis J. Bridget assembled approximately 500 unattached marines, naval aviators and sailors and converted them into an infantry unit that came to be known as the Naval Battalion. In early January, the Japanese had landed troops on the undefended beaches of Longoskawayan Point behind Bataan's American lines. The Japanese hoped to cut supply lines and flank American and Filipino forces. Bataan's command assigned Bridget and the Naval Battalion the mission of surrounding the Japanese infiltrators and pushing them back to the sea. Crotty rotated over to Bataan during this time to serve in the Bataan jungles with Bridget. Late in the month, the two men boarded the Quail and, on the morning of January 27, they used the minesweeper as command ship to coordinate a land and sea bombardment that wiped out some of the Japanese force hidden in the jungle and in coastal caves. The next day, Filipino infantry took over from the Naval Battalion and finished the job a few days later.



*Minesweeper USS Quail before the war. (US Navy Photo)*



*The island fortress of Corregidor as seen from the east. (US Army Photo)*

During the rest of Crotty's time as second in command, Quail provided vital anti-aircraft cover and likely shot down several low-flying enemy aircraft. Quail also swept the Navy's expansive minefield seeded around Manila Bay. This minefield and one planted by the U.S. Army ensured the survival of American forces by denying the Japanese navy access to Manila Bay; allowing passage of American water traffic between Bataan, Corregidor and other island defenses; and ensuring that U.S. submarines could surface at night to deliver goods and remove critical

personnel. On a number of occasions, Crotty assisted in the minesweeping process, which required two motor lifeboats, a chain and rifles. With the chain suspended between them, the two watercraft proceeded along a parallel predetermined course through the minefield. The chain would snag the mines, and the boat crews would raise them to the surface and shoot holes in them until they sank. This process helped clear between ten and twenty mines and only a few of them detonated during the operation.

The month of April proved a pivotal one for Crotty. On April 1, he sent out the last message his family would ever receive. On April 9, the diseased, starving and exhausted American and Filipino troops besieged on the Bataan Peninsula finally surrendered to the enemy. By mid-April, Crotty left the Quail and, for the rest of the month, he served as adjutant to the headquarters staff of the Sixteenth Naval District at Fort Mills. In addition, he served as a member of the Marine Corp's Fourth Regiment, First Battalion, which defended the narrow strip of the island stretching from strategically important Malinta Hill to the eastern point of the island. Of the four battalions defending Corregidor, only the First Battalion would engage enemy invasion forces, which landed on May 5. An eyewitness report indicates that Crotty supervised army personnel manning a seventy-five millimeter field howitzer dug-in on top of Malinta Hill, the small mountain that protected the island fortress's underground command center. Crotty's field piece faced east, toward the oncoming Japanese troops and he served up until American forces surrendered in the afternoon of May 6.

With Corregidor's capitulation, Crotty became the first Coast Guard prisoner of war since the War of 1812, when the British captured certain U.S. Revenue Cutter Service vessels and their crews. The Japanese loaded Crotty and his fellow prisoners into vessels bound for Manila, where the POWs awaited railroad shipment to a prison camp in northern Luzon. Eyewitnesses indicate that the prisoners had to stand up throughout the entire lengthy trip and many of the weak and infirm that entered the boxcars never survived to exit them. Fellow prisoners reported



*Taken the night of the last submarine escape by USS Spearfish, 3 May 1942. (US Army)*



that Crotty arrived at Camp #1, Cabanatuan Prison, and lived in a barracks reserved for officers with the rank of lieutenant.



*American and Filipino troops surrender in front of Corregidor's command center, 6 May 1942. (Japanese Defense Agency)*

prison walls. In a subsequent letter to Mrs. Crotty, fellow prisoner and Marine Corps major, M. Dobervich, wrote that "[Crotty's] friends were heartbroken over the suddenness of his death, but we had to carry on, the same as you do."

Back home in Buffalo, Crotty's situation remained unknown. At South Buffalo's St. Aquinas Catholic Church, parishioners were asked to remember Crotty in their prayers. Meanwhile, Helen Crotty had received no word of her son's situation since April 1, when she last heard from him. According to his older sister, Mary, Mrs. Crotty watched and waited for the mailman every day and she seemed to fail visibly with each passing day. The family finally contacted Washington, D.C., for any information regarding Jimmy's location or condition. Little was known, however, until late summer, when a few escaped prisoners began to filter back to the States.



*POWs marchin under the scorching sun at the Cabanatuan prison camp. (Macarthur Memorial Library, Norfolk, Va.)*

At Cabanatuan, prisoners remembered Crotty for his sense of humor and positive attitude. One of them recounted his "continued optimism and cheerfulness under the most adverse circumstances. He was outstanding in this respect at a time when such an attitude was so necessary for the general welfare." But Crotty's character alone could not sustain him in July, when a severe diphtheria epidemic swept through the camp. By mid-month, he contracted the illness. Eyewitness accounts indicate that with the prison camp's lack of proper medication and health care, he passed away on July 19, only three days after getting sick. A burial party gave Crotty his last rites and buried him in a mass grave outside the

In October 1942, Coast Guard Commandant Russell R. Waesche met with, and then received a letter from, navy intelligence officer Lieutenant Commander Denys W. Knoll. On May 3, Knoll had boarded USS Spearfish (SS-190), the last submarine to depart Corregidor before the island fortress fell into enemy hands. In the letter, Knoll recounted his recollections of Crotty's character and service in the defense of the Philippines:

“Lieutenant Crotty impressed us all with his fine qualities of naval leadership which were combined with a very pleasant personality and a willingness to assist everyone to the limit of his ability. He continued to remain very cheerful and retained a high morale until my departure from Fort Mills the evening of May 3rd.” Lt. Cdr. Knoll concluded his letter to Commandant Waesche: “Having seen Lieutenant Crotty undergo all the trials during my five months in the Manila Bay area, I feel sure that the rigors and trials of a prisoner of war will produce little if any change, and I look forward to the return of Lieutenant Crotty to active duty, for I am sure he will continue to perform his duties in keeping with all the traditions of the Naval and Coast Guard Services.” By the time Knoll had penned these lines to the Commandant, Crotty had been deceased for several weeks.

The story of Lt. Crotty has been lost and forgotten like so many of his fallen comrades from Bataan and Corregidor. In January 1945, the army’s Sixth Ranger Battalion liberated Cabanatuan Prison, an event glorified in books and movies. Liberation came too late for Crotty however, whose body remains buried alongside thousands of other American and Filipino heroes who perished in the insufferable conditions at Cabanatuan. No one knows the exact location of Crotty’s gravesite and he will likely remain the Coast Guard’s final and only MIA. Records indicate that Lt. Crotty was the only active duty Coast Guardsman that fought the Japanese at Bataan and Corregidor, operations that merited authorization of the Defense of the Philippines battle streamer for the Coast Guard. Even though Crotty earned a battle streamer for the service, he received little individual recognition for his heroic efforts during those desperate months of 1941 and 1942.

Thomas James Eugene Crotty performed exceptional duty under trying circumstances and distinguished himself through his various combat roles. The official U.S. Marine Corps history for the defense of Corregidor concludes that those who fought in the ranks of the Fourth Marine Regiment, “whatever their service of origin, were, if only for a brief moment, Corregidor Marines.” In addition, Crotty served his men and his country to the best of his ability under the most cruel and inhumane conditions. In his letter to Helen Crotty, Jimmy’s boyhood friend, Bill Joyce, concluded “He left this world a better place than he found it, and I am more than thankful that I was honored to know him.” Jimmy Crotty not only practiced the Coast Guard’s core values of honor, respect and devotion to duty; he lived them.